

Jacob's Descent: A Liv Bergen Mystery

Sandra Brannan

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A whip-smart, tough-minded yet vulnerable female detective rumbling through a gritty environment makes for great entertainment.

In her sixth Liv Bergen adventure, Sandra Brannan drops the young FBI agent into the middle of a complex family feud, one reignited by the collision of a Capulet-Montague-like romance and further complicated by the one-hundred-year-old vigilante killing of a Catholic priest.

After her boyfriend is killed, Liv goes on compassion leave, home to South Dakota. During a casual night on the town, Liv, with her sister, Agatha, and Agatha's boyfriend, Sheriff's Detective Harvey Logan, are shocked to learn that a childhood friend, Father Billy O'Connell, has been mugged and seriously injured.

The priest at the local St. Ambrose Church, O'Connell spends time his spare time investigating the mystery of the century-old unsolved murder of Father Darby. Soon there's evidence that O'Connell's assault may be related to a long feud between the Jacobs family, which is mostly Protestant, and the Irish-Catholic Murphys.

The rugged Black Hills setting is generally sketched out in place names like Poor Man's Gulch, Mustang Sally's, and the long, lonesome highways where the only illumination comes from a ramshackle pickup's one working headlight. Expanding and deepening the local framework of the story are explorations of Catholic-Protestant animosity, aggravated by private grudges that soon have larger consequences.

There are some memorable characters here, including the surly sheriff, Leonard L. Leonard, and a nun, Sister Catherine, who is Liv and Agatha's sister. "Sister Cat" is a technicolor nun: a constantly hungry 200-plus-pound dynamo whose appetite matches her big heart. Another well-drawn character is Mully, leader of Lucifer's Lot Motorcycle Club, a gang that straddles the line of legality.

Oddly, the various Jacobs and Murphys who appear are more role-players than characters who linger in memory. All seem to alternate between resentment and paranoia, and it's often difficult to determine who's good and who's trouble, or who has a legitimate grudge, and why. The smokescreen generated by the feud does have the advantage of leaving the revelation of the culprit a surprise. The narrative moves along quickly enough, mostly driven by an abundance of dialogue, and there's plenty of tension, internal and external. There is, however, minimal backstory related to Liv and her cohorts—no problem to early discoverers of the series.

A whip-smart, tough-minded yet vulnerable female detective rumbling through a gritty environment invariably makes for great entertainment, as *Jacob's Descent* proves.

GARY PRESLEY (June 13, 2017)

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